

Dialogue

*Beyond Hula, Hotels, and Handicrafts:
A Pacific Islander's Perspective of Tourism Development*

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An Interview with ALBERT WENDT

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today your words are empty
sucking dry the brown dust
left by earth and sky
patches politely parched
with no water flowing
from the mountain top
scars burn on my soft skin
you've cut a piece of me away
leaving my bandaged heart
to endure the pain
of your tying me
to yourself

The business of tourism and the notion of conservation of cultural heritages, at least in the contexts of small Pacific Island cultures, seem strangely contradictory. This is because, in my view, tourism was and continues to be a major contributor to, as well as manifestation of, a process of cultural invasion that began in earnest with the spread of Christianity and Western colonial interests in the nineteenth century and has continued more recently, thanks to modern Western technological advancement, to the universalization of Western—mainly Anglo-American market-oriented, capitalist, monetized—culture.

Such an invasion has left its marks on most island environments, symbolized by such things as automobiles, advertising, supermarkets, shopping malls, fast-food outlets, hotel chains, Hollywood movies, credit cards, consulting firms, and, dare I say, international symposia. Depending on where one's cultural loyalty lies, such symbols signify either

progress and modern development or the erosion and ultimate death of indigenous island cultures and their value systems. This new transnational culture, like a fire, spreads with varying intensity among our islands, but unlike most island fires, this one is kindled not by dry palm fronds but by advertising and the mass media, its smoke suffocating the air, leaving soot and scars on the soft skin of our fragile island environments.

Although diverse, our island cultures share in the common experience of change and transformation that all cultures undergo with varying degrees of intensity. Throughout our histories, strands of nonindigenous cultures have been woven into our cultural fabrics, leaving what our peoples perceive as unique collective ways of life, worthy of protecting and passing on to future generations.

Most of our indigenous cultures were, in comparison with Western, urban-industrial cultures, ecologically conservative and generally compatible with the laws of ecology: gentle use of scarce resources served large populations for hundreds of years. Environmental awareness and sustainability (in the Western sense) were central to the survival of these diverse societies, made up of people who lived close to the land and the sea and who had the ability to read the diurnal, monthly, and seasonal cycles of their environments. The island environment and the plants and animals in it were all integral parts of island ecocultures. Today, knowledge and awareness of the environment are rapidly being eroded thanks to the kinds of transformation and socialization that modern development has brought to our shores. This process of modernization and transformation causes not only the cultural alienation of many of our young people, but the concomitant slow hemorrhaging of traditional, environment-related knowledge—knowledge that represented the blood from the land and was connected to the nerve centers of our cultures. Largely as a result, many of our people, especially our Western-educated economists and business persons, are beginning to suffer from severe ecological blindness and an overdependence on moneyed economies over which we have no control. The situation is leading to a reduced ability to deal not only with the usual natural disasters of cyclones, droughts, and earthquakes but also social and cultural disasters of the types and magnitude already experienced in many parts of our world.

A couple of these cultural disasters will suffice as examples. First is the problem of landlessness. Land was and continues to be central to indigenous identities and livelihood. Just as a healthy bank account is a basis for

security and authority in most Western societies, the land, and all the plants and animals in it, gave our ancestors a sense of (psychological) security and identification, and provided the bases for their status and authority. Today vast areas of native land in our island countries have been "alienated." Largely as a result of colonialism, land has been put on the open market, turned into freehold or fee-simple property, and used for a variety of modern purposes including militarism and tourism development.

For example, in New Caledonia in 1960, only 8.6 percent of the land was in Melanesian reserve (for Kanak use), 20.1 percent was freehold, and the state owned the largest proportion, 61.1 percent. Prime agricultural lands have also been alienated from native Hawaiians, Tahitians, Samoans, Fijians, Ni-Vanuatu, and Solomon Islanders (Crocombe 1964; Brady 1974; Lundsgaarde 1974). Such alienation has had a direct bearing on the survival or otherwise of Pacific Island cultures, and as many people are aware, land alienation was the beginning of the end of many indigenous cultures, including those of the Hawaiians, the New Zealand Maori, the Australian Aborigines, and the Kanaks. That these cultures have managed to survive in the face of so much deliberate and not-so-deliberate destruction is testimony to their survival strength and value. Today, stripped of much of their land or environment, cultural survival for many island peoples is often tenuously based on such touristically salable aspects of their culture as song, dance, and handicrafts, rather than on the more productive environment-based aspects.

Another major issue confronting our cultures today relates to the kinds of development models being sold or recommended to us by foreign aid advisers and consultants from whose countries and governments comes much of the external aid to our island nations. Such (development) models are familiar to most Islanders. It is ironic that although many of these models have not been proved successful in the countries where they originate, many of us are still willing to have our islands used as test cases. We often have no choice.

In this context of so-called development, Tourism (with a capital T) is seen as desirable, especially as an important source of foreign exchange. It is a major industry in Fiji, New Caledonia and French Polynesia, Vanuatu, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

However, tourism development in our islands has many costs. It has

had serious impact on coastal ecosystems, affecting land rights, land use, and fisheries development, all significant aspects of indigenous island cultures. Furthermore, attempts to develop alternative forms of tourism, for example, the development of national parks, clearly illustrate the dilemma between the economic benefits derived from increasing the tourism revenue and the need to protect cultural artefacts and ecosystems that give national parks their value.

More important perhaps, tourism, like other types of economic activity in Pacific Island countries, was and continues to be foreign to most of our people. A colonial legacy, its organization was and still is directly related to preexisting capital originally developed to serve foreign colonial (as opposed to indigenous) interests. Consequently the input content and exchange leakage of tourism in most of our island countries is high (up to 70 percent in Fiji) and the multiplier effect is low. Furthermore, colonial links not only helped shape the islands' ability to develop tourism, but also account for the differences in tourism development that have evolved in our different island countries (Britton 1987).

For example, the colonial administration in Fiji encouraged and developed tourism by acts of parliament (1962 Duty Free and 1964 Hotel ordinances; see Britton 1987, 124). These enabled the construction of hotels and the establishment of duty-free facilities. Such development assisted mainly local Europeans and other nonindigenous people to invest in tourism activities, grafting them onto an export economy already established in other industries, such as sugar, copra, and gold. Today tourism in Fiji continues to be characterized by the domination of foreign enterprises. Both inside and outside Fiji, overseas companies (most recently Japanese) carry out the crucial functions of the tourism industry, from wholesaling, through transport and supply of essential inputs, to ownership and development of major hotel chains. Perhaps the most revealing thing about Fiji tourism is the lack of indigenous Fijian involvement in the industry, even though ethnic Fijians provide much of the labor in the hotel and other sectors. They are active in handicraft vending, but even there other groups (for example, Tongans, Indians) are also active.

This lack of an indigenous presence in the tourism industry often means that overseas and nonindigenous local interests are increasingly allowed to influence political decision making. Furthermore, the possibility of abuse of investment privileges leads to the government losing important tax money from larger foreign-owned hotel companies. This is especially

serious given that governments have had to pay for administrative requirements and infrastructure demanded by the industry (Britton 1987, 126).

Tourism development in Fiji mirrors the kind of tourism typical of neo-colonial economies. Despite being a major foreign exchange earner it serves the interests of mainly foreign and nonindigenous locals who dominate the island nation's commercial activities. Furthermore, it erodes rather than strengthens Fijian traditional knowledge and use of the environment, in contrast to the situation in Fiji's nearest neighbor, Tonga, the only island nation not to have come directly under colonial rule.

In Tonga the tourism picture is different. Although on a much smaller scale than in Fiji, tourism in Tonga has not yet developed major linkages with metropolitan markets and companies. Having not been directly colonized, Tonga had no external authorities to exploit air-traffic rights and no large local nonindigenous communities to lobby for tourism development. Tourism development there was seen as an attempt to "sanctify the monarch and help the national economy" (Britton 1987).

The establishment in 1966 of a government-owned hotel was an effort to provide accommodation for guests attending the king's coronation, and the dramatic increase in cruise ships visiting the kingdom in the sixties and seventies led to the development of the handicraft industry, now totally controlled by Tongans. The government has since been encouraging local entrepreneurs to establish more tourism accommodation and tours, and the gradual but cautious growth of tourism over the years seems to coincide with the expansion of air transport facilities and the establishment of a national airline.

As in colonial days, when the role of our islands was to supply labor and raw materials for colonial markets, now we depend on metropolitan countries and Japan to fill airplanes and hotel rooms. However, it has been estimated that much of the tourist dollar goes back to developed countries. In my view tourism in the Pacific Islands ought to be understood in this context of neocolonial relationships between island nations and metropolitan countries such as France, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Japan.

Within such a relationship, our islands have come to be seen as providing needed leisure space and entertainment for the inhabitants of mainly capitalist economies—space to relax from the demands of productive work regimes and urban centers, and places where people can escape their daily routines and become refreshed and rejuvenated. Some even perceive

our islands as offering them exotic alternatives to their own alienation. In this there is perhaps an irony, because so many of us see tourists' behavior and life-styles as models for our own advancement toward modernity.

How can we Pacific Islanders deal with this continual overdependence on former colonial masters and the pressure on our respective environment-based heritages that is a consequence of that dependence? First, we need to pause and analyze what we are accepting. In my view many models of development, whether in tourism or education or health, are inappropriate to our contexts because they make incorrect assumptions about indigenous peoples and their cultures. For example, most if not all models of development I have seen (mainly in island nations' development plans) treat culture as a variable in the development process; yet traditionally, culture is perceived not as a variable but as the framework and basis of our development. The kinds of cultural syntheses we have been able to achieve have tended to come about by accident rather than a conscious plan to weave the best of our traditional knowledge and values together with the new knowledge and skills acquired from other cultures. A more conscious and systematic synthesis is particularly necessary today, because many of our young people are no longer in a position to be the recipients of traditional knowledge, skills, and attitudes; some now consider their traditions a waste of time and money and are deaf to the voices of their elders.

Another problem about adopting the Western view of development has to do with the practice of breaking up information into bits and putting them into neat little compartments. Consequently things are treated as if they were separate from one another. Experts, for example, talk about the environment as if it were separate from tourism, or the economy as if separate from culture. Our languages, if people cared to study them, provide clues to our perceptions of development and the environment, indeed to our worldviews. It is time discussions about tourism development, and all development for that matter, were undertaken from the point of view of those being "developed."

Today, experts talk about ecotourism—tourism development that is environment-friendly and the buzzword of the nineties. Part of the wider concept of "sustainable development" recently popularized in the media in relation to global environmental concerns, this idea will no doubt become another bandwagon for some. However, concerns about ecotourism seem to focus mainly on physical resources such as beaches, forests, and

oceans. People, their beliefs and values, tend to be missing from these discussions. This is most unfortunate because much of our cultural knowledge and heritage are found not in books but in people; when *we* talk about cultural heritage we are talking about people, not artefacts.

Unfortunately also, the notion of "sustainable development" as currently debated, seems to me to have a lot more to do with maintaining economic growth and conserving natural resources primarily for the enjoyment and development of metropolitan or developed societies—issues related to the protection of the "global commons." Similarly, concern about "lost cultures" is basically a concern for those aspects of our cultures which, in both the long and the short term, are seen to be beneficial or of interest to developed societies. Very few, if any, studies I have seen are concerned with the actual perceptions and practices of those who are being developed or with sustainability in relation to cultural practices at the community level.

This is the problem with a universal "development" culture based on money rather than people. Ecotourism incentives that protect the ecosystems of Pacific Islanders will no doubt be exploited by some group out to make a buck. According to the World Resources Institute, in 1990 there were more than three hundred US companies selling wildlife and nature tours (O'Neill 1991, 25). The question always seems to be How can we profit from this? A major new USAID project is appropriately entitled PEP (Profitable Environmental Projects). The process of commodification of island indigenous cultures and their natural resources will increasingly become the trend of the future, as we grow to like and eventually need the products of our own exploitation.

Where do we go from here? Many of us need first of all to recognize our enslavement to the dominant cultures of colonial masters. We must also learn to understand what happened and is happening to us as a consequence of mainly Western cultural imperialism, a process in which many of us actively play a part. We need most of all, to be reborn, not in the evangelical style of American television, but in a way that permits us to free ourselves from the straitjacket of viewing the world only from a particular perspective—where lands and peoples are seen as separate objects and are to be exploited for profit; where the massive machinery of inequality demands that some humans should continue to treat other humans like pawns on the developmental chessboard of the environment. Not until the commercial imperative and the profit motive are deempha-

sized will most of our people have a hope of realizing the benefits of eco-tourism and other eco concepts. Until then, such ideas will remain only figments of the imagination of academics, wishful thinkers, and conference goers. My hope, therefore, is that efforts will be made with a view to helping Pacific Islanders as well as others to better understand our cultural environments and further improve our ability to see one another more clearly in order to fashion an ecotourism by and for Pacific peoples.

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THIS PAPER was originally presented at the Third Global Congress of Heritage Interpretation International, 3–8 November 1991, at Honolulu.

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